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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: TAIWAN REFERENDA ON UN BID AND US-TAIWAN  
RELATIONS

¶1. Summary: News coverage of Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies October 19 centered on the dispute over the arrangements for issuing referendum ballots during the 2008 legislative and presidential elections; YouTube's launching a site in traditional Chinese characters; and the returning of the body of Chen Chi-li, former leader of Taiwan's largest triad, Bamboo Union, who was imprisoned for killing Henry Liu, who wrote a critical biography of the late president Chiang Ching-kuo.

¶2. In terms of editorials and commentaries, a news analysis in the centrist, KMT-leaning "China Times" said US-Taiwan relations may be worsened by arrangements for issuing referendum ballots during the 2008 presidential election. Another "China Times" commentary said Taiwan may have to explain to the United States about its next step after the UN bid referendums cross the 50% validation threshold. The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" in an editorial criticized the US position toward Taiwan's UN referendums. Meanwhile, the conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" editorialized that the DPP is only using the referendum votes as an aid to win the presidential election. End summary.

A) "Once the Threshold Handicap Is Resolved, US-Taiwan Relations Will Feel the Impact"

Journalist Wu Tien-jung noted in the centrist, KMT-leaning "China Times" [circulation: 400,000] (10/19):

"Once the Central Election Committee decides that the ballots of the presidential election and the two referenda on Taiwan's bid to the UN will be 'cast at the same time', then the probability will significantly increase that the referendum on 'applying for UN membership under the name of "Taiwan"' will cross the high validating threshold and be approved. It can be expected that US-Taiwan relations will be further strained from now until March ¶2008.

"... Although the United States strongly opposes Taiwan's referendums on its UN bid, the messages conveyed by all parties were that the threshold for validating a referendum in Taiwan is too high for the UN referenda to be adopted. In the future, should it find that the validating threshold is no longer a problem for the 'UN bid referenda,' how is the United States going to react? One can expect that it will be more difficult to improve US-Taiwan relations until March 2008."

B) "After the Referenda"

A commentary in the centrist, KMT-leaning "China Times" [circulation: 400,000] commented (10/19):

"... If the same arrangements for simultaneously issuing and casting ballots for the legislative elections and the referendums [on anti-corruption and KMT party assets] are to be applied to the

presidential elections, there will still be troubles mentioned above. There can be only one advantage: the ballots may be issued 'half-coercively' so that the turnout rates of the referendums will cross the 50% validating threshold...

"As the Pan-Blue and the Pan-Green camps each have their own proposed referendum, the only way to avoid the situation that the rival camp reaches the 50% threshold while our own camp fails is to step up to mobilize supporters. The argument being used to ease US pressure in the first place was that the two referenda will not be validated. If the Blue and Green voters work smartly with the mobilization efforts, then the proposal to join the UN and the proposal to return to the UN will both exceed 50%. Then the last and possibly the most important issue will be: how is Taiwan going to explain to the United States what the next step will be?"

#### C) "Blocked by the US at Every Turn"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (10/19):

"Taiwan watchers in the US may have been surprised by media reports on Wednesday that the military has already begun deployment of its newly developed Hsiung Feng II-E cruise missile and is on the verge of starting mass production. The White House must have been aware of this well in advance.

"Several conservative think tank academics in the US -- most notably at the Cato Institute -- have been highly critical of Taiwan, accusing it of over-reliance on the US and claiming it is unwilling to defend itself.

"The US government, meanwhile, is eager to hold up Taiwan's democracy as an example to the world, but when Taiwan asserts the US administration's favorite buzzword by holding a referendum,

Washington changes the rules, criticizes Taipei and holds back on previously agreed weapons sales.

"Then, when Taiwan, in its frustration over the lack of weapons available, begins to develop means of defending itself, the US frowns upon it and takes prompt action to block any move.

"Washington, it seems, wants to have its cake and eat it too.

"The document that dictates US policy on Taiwan -- the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) -- states that the US is only allowed to sell Taiwan weapons 'of a defensive character.' Nowhere does it give the White House the right to dictate what the Taiwanese military can or cannot do.

"Of course, the TRA also stresses the need to 'help maintain peace, security and stability in the Western Pacific,' but calling the Taiwanese government's UN referendum campaign a threat to regional stability -- as influential US officials have done -- is grossly exaggerating matters.

"... The US' decades-long policy of strategic ambiguity over the Taiwan issue means no one -- including the Taiwanese government and the US itself -- knows whether Washington would send US troops to help defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack.

"Meanwhile, the Bush administration's 'war on terror' and the unlimited nature of such a conflict means the US military is already stretched to its limits and will remain so for the foreseeable future. While its forces remain bogged down in the Middle East, there would be little domestic appetite for US troops to get involved in another war far from its shores.

"This means that if the White House continues to hold back on weapons sales, then Taiwan must forge ahead and develop and build its own -- even at the risk of upsetting its best friend.

"But even the mass production of these domestic missiles is now in jeopardy, as Washington has begun to put the squeeze on the export of key engine components, while the pan-blue camp has slashed the budget for production.

"Washington has said many times in the past that it wants Taiwan to be in a strong position militarily to enable it to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the cross-strait issue with China on an equal footing.

"The US' recent actions, juxtaposed with the relentless pace of China's military build-up, have shown those assertions to be nothing more than lip service."

D) "Referendums Mustn't Be Used to Achieve Selfish Objectives"

The conservative, pro-unification, English-language "China Post" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (10/19):

"... The electoral win [in the 2004 presidential election] has led the DPP to believe holding a referendum is one of the most effective strategies to win voter support. To make this strategy even more effective, the DPP has proposed that during next year's presidential election, voters be issued two ballots at the same time -- one for the election and the other for the referendum. Apparently the party thinks this procedure will increase the percentage of voters who cast the referendum ballot. This plan is further evidence that the DPP is using the referendum as an aid to win the presidential battle and that its U.N.-membership-for Taiwan campaign is a political trick intended to sway voters. Referenda are designed to allow the people to vote directly on disputable issues. Advocates of the referendum argue that certain decisions are best determined directly by the people and claim that such direct votes are a mark of democracy. The fact is, the referendum has been used by dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini, who used the practice to implement oppressive policies under the guise of populism. If referendums are a good way for the public to express their opinions on public issues, why should elections of people's representatives such as city councilors and legislators, be held? Voters in a referendum may be insufficiently informed about the questions they are asked, especially if the questions concern complicated issues. In Taiwan, most of the people living in the urban areas of the north are highly educated, and therefore able to deliberate carefully and independently on political matters. But residents of the south are much likely swayed by propaganda or large-scale advertising campaigns. And the DPP is currently carrying out an expensive propaganda effort to promote the idea that the island should seek U.N. membership under the name of Taiwan. As some opposition legislators have pointed out, the advertising campaign is being pushed at the taxpayers' expense. Sadly, this party, with the word 'democratic' in its name, is doing something very undemocratic."

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